Archive Dayak

Aug 20 ·

Tom Harrisson – The Malays of South-West Sarawak Before Malaysia: A Socio-Ecological Survey (1970), Michigan State University.

This scholarly work by Tom Harrisson, the first curator of the Sarawak Museum and a distinguished British anthropologist, provides an in-depth analysis of Malay society in Sarawak. It explores their cultural history and traces their early presence to Sumatran traders who later settled in Borneo.

The Malays of South-West Sarawak before Malaysia

Tom Harrisson

THE MALAYS OF SOUTH-WEST SARAWAK BEFORE MALAYSIA

A SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL SURVEY

TOM HARRISSON

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
EAST LANSING
1970

Scholars have always taken for granted the premise that the Malays of South-West Sarawak were of the same ethnic and cultural background as the Malays of the mainland or the Malays of Indonesia. Professor Harrisson shows conclusively, in this first major study of these people, that this is not so and that, far from being mere immigrants, the Sarawak Malays are basically native Borneans of pagan ancestry.

The book describes in considerable detail the day-to-day life of these Moslem people, and reveals the remarkable pattern of activities on water and land that it involves. In the face of the challenge offered to them by the difficulties of the sea, estuaries, rivers and swamps that makes up the terrain in which they live, the Malays have evolved an extremely complex way of life only within the last few centuries. The skills that they have developed are multiple and practised constantly, and a single man may be proficient as a rice farmer, deep-sea fisherman, charcoal gatherer, rubber tapper, carpenter, boat builder and jungle hunter at one and the same time. One skill, however, is rarely developed to specialist level at the cost of the others.

The basically descriptive approach that Tom Harrisson has adopted to his subject will undoubtedly create controversy. This, however, derives naturally from the twenty years during which the author lived and worked among the people he describes. This technique, he found, was by far the best

invention of steam about 150 years ago. Indeed, the known and demonstrable human influences, in terms of present population, did not come into the south-west of Sarawak as a whole so much by sea as by land. And here by land means tremendous journeys across from the south of Borneo and over the mountains into the north-west. This was the route taken by all the principal people now living in the interior of West Borneo; the Land Dayaks and ineptly called Sea Dayaks (Iban), then the Kayans and Kenyahs, and finally the Kelabits and Muruts, as we run – or rather creep – up the border spine of the island. It is not surprising, therefore, that the oldest recorded genealogy in Sarawak Malay hands today traces thirty generations back to Menangkabau in Sumatra. It will be salutary to print this genealogy here, in simplified form, and try to bear it in mind by way of background.

Abang Gudam, like many before him, came as a trader from Sumatra. He rescued a Brunei lady who had been seized by the Sultan without her father's consent, married her and settled in the Saribas district to found the Malay aristocracy of that area. The descendants of Rajah Suran were clearly not Moslems (they were possibly 'Hindus') until well on in this journey.

1. Rajah Suran
   |
2. Rajah Ismail
   |
3. Rajah Rmabli
   |
4. Rajah Isti
   |
5. Rajah Jadit

that the oldest recorded genealogy in Sarawak Malay hands today traces thirty generations back to Menangkabau in Sumatra. It will be salutary to print this genealogy here, in simplified form, and try to bear it in mind by way of background.

Abang Gudam, like many before him, came as a trader from Sumatra. He rescued a Brunei lady who had been seized by the Sultan without her father's consent, married her and settled in the Saribas district to found the Malay aristocracy of that area. The descendants of Rajah Suran were clearly not Moslems (they were possibly 'Hindus') until well on in this journey.

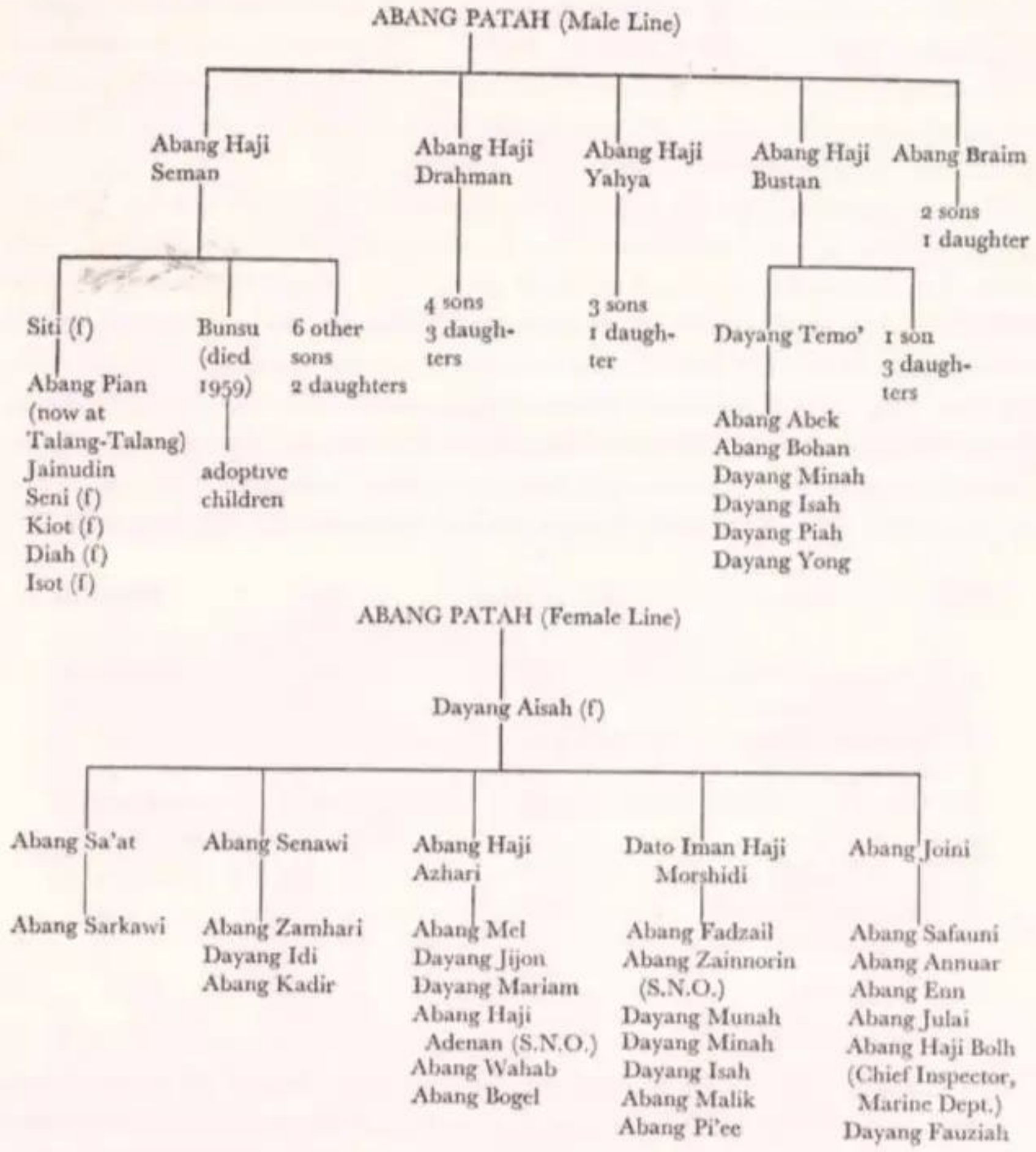
1. Rajah Suran
2. Rajah Ismail
3. Rajah Rmabli
4. Rajah Isti
5. Rajah Jadit
6. Rajah Hamid
7. Rajah Umat
8. Rajah Driss
9. Rajah Basir
10. Rajah Ladah

11. Rajah Inchaik
|
12. Rajah Jaffar
|
13. Rajah Saffar
|
14. Rajah Suleiman
|
15. Bandarhara Samad
|
16. Bandarhara Mansur
|
17. Bandarhara Ismail
|
18. Bandarhara Harun
|
19. ABANG GUDAM – first 'Malay' chief to settle in the Saribas river
|
20. Datu Bandar Draham
|
21. Datu Nuga Omar
|
22. Bandar Bukut
|
23. Bandar Hai or Ai
|
24. Datu Patinggi Mula
|
25. Datu Patinggi Kedit
|
26. Laksamana Amir and Laksamana Omar
|
27. Abang Apong, etc.
|
28. Dayang Tiah
|
29. Abang Abing
|
30. Abang Zin (died childless in 1958).

Notes:

1. Osman's father was killed by a Japanese lorry in the Occupation. His eldest son Chegu Joharee, teacher, holds several lot titles due for family division on Talang-Talang Besar Island.
2. Omar now holds a share (in the name of his mother) on Talang-Talang Kechil Island.

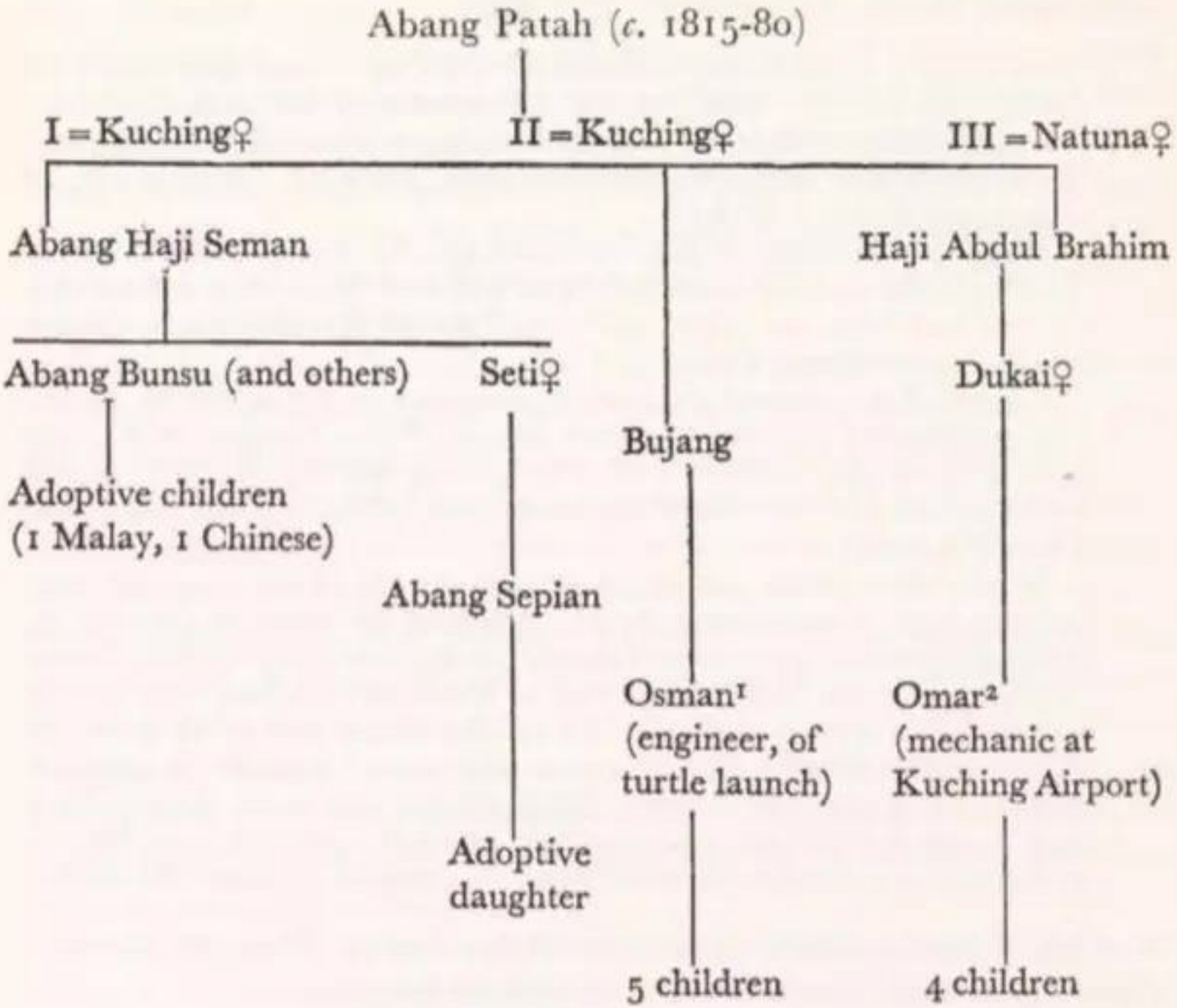
Taken *in toto* regardless of wives, Abang Patah's island roots led to:



(Abang Patah also had a daughter, Dayang Asiah, many of whose grandchildren now live in Kuching; and Dayang Asiah also had three daughters, not shown above. Siti = Seti, above; Abang Pian = Abang Sepian.)

how does one yet know? For to adoptive children the laws of inheritance are more elastic, in practice if not in theory; and if not 'legally' adopted, all is optional. The sharing is, in this way, under more *control* than if there were many children. To have one heir (two for safety?) is essential, of course. Otherwise, the owner will lose title to collaterals in the family after death. That is also why Abang Sepian has adopted a daughter legally, the true daughter of his wife's sister.

The picture, *much* simplified:



drastic methods so that it was possible for Abang Patah to settle the islands. He had no land title – and, then, no need of such. The arrangement suited Brooke and brought turtle eggs in warm supply to the mainland too. All the land was held as *pesaka*, free grant by the rajah.

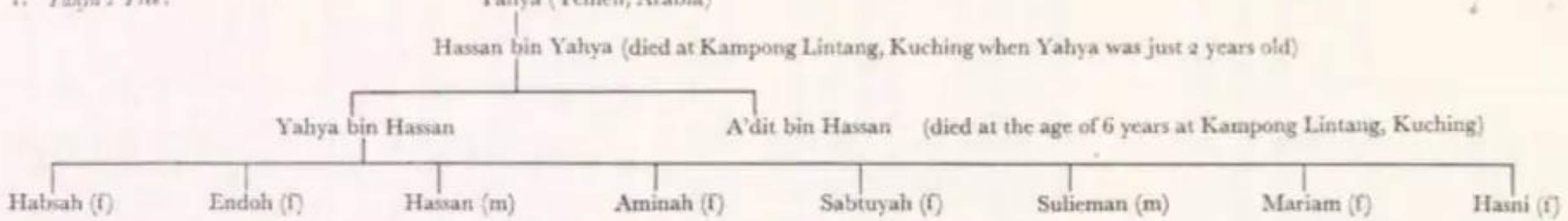
Abang Patah's son (Haji Osman) presently 'sold' some of the land on Talang-Talang Besar to Datu Hakim Abdulrahim, grandfather of the late Datu Bandar (died in 1964), who asked a share and was a close relative. 'Not that he wanted to sell. But this was not to another person. He could have sold to anyone *else*' (Abang Sepian).

Here is the story and its background, as told by A. K. Merican Salleh (see *Sarawak Museum Journal*, VIII (1959), xii):

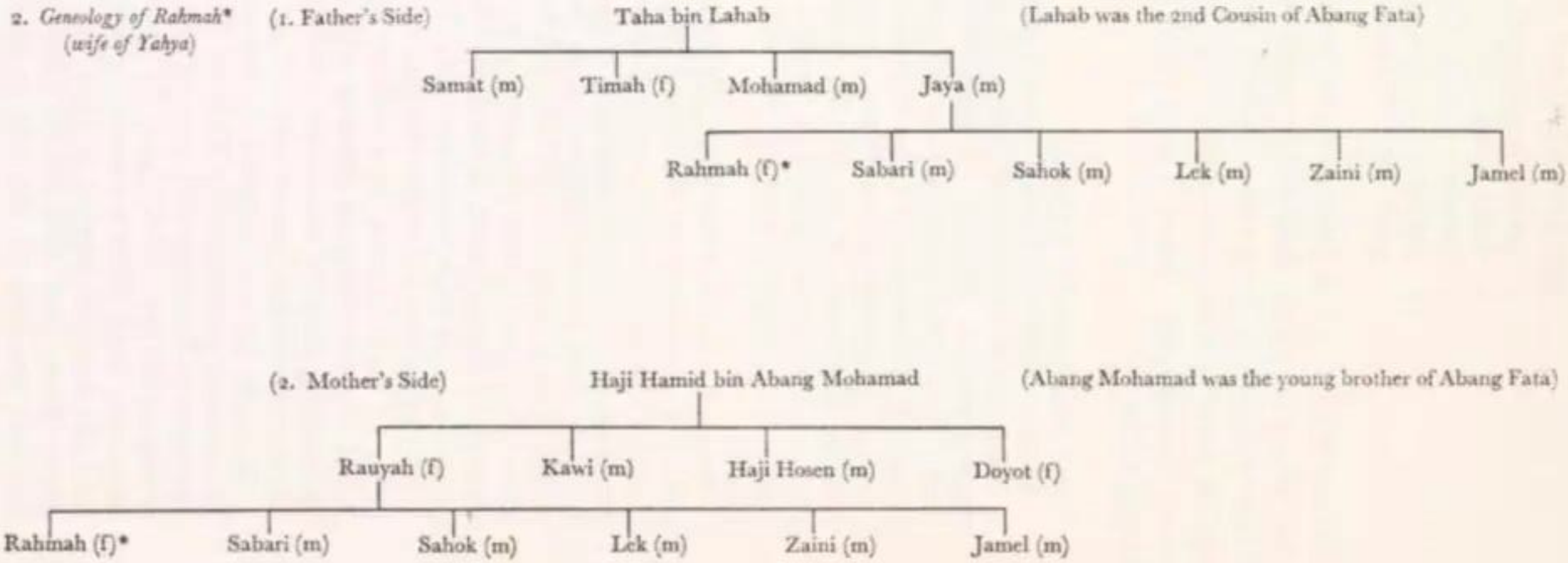
> According to legend, over a hundred years ago – and just before the first Rajah Brooke – coconut was not known in Sarawak. But there was one Nakoda Sela' who first came to know about the fruit through his acquaintance with the people of Java, Sumatra, Celebes, etc., to which he sailed as a trader.
>
> While on his way to Rio Archipelago, he found three coconuts floating in the sea. He collected them and took them back to Sarawak. On his way back, he called at Pulau Talang² Kechil (Turtle Island) where he met Abang Fatta.
>
> Nakoda Sela' related the story of coconuts to Abang Fatta, especially mentioning that the Coconut Island (Pulau Kelapa) at Rio was fully planted with coconut trees. On hearing this with interest, Abang Fatta asked for the three coconuts and planted them at Pulau Talang² Kechil.
>
> Seven years later, Abang Fatta found the three coconut trees bearing fruit. Upon seeing this, he made up his mind to develop the island as a coconut plantation. One day he approached Penglima Nawas (a Lundu Dayak, one of Raja Api of Sematan's leading warriors) to assist him to spread good charms on the island and so to drive the ghosts and devils away; then, to cut and clear the jungle in preparation for a big planting scheme. When all this was done, Abang Fatta and Penghulu Nawas continuously planted coconuts collected or gathered from the three original trees. So coconut became well known.

The Island land remains entirely in Malay hands. These are the only places in all coastal Sarawak where no Chinese foot steps.

1. *Yahya's Tree:*


Yahya (Yemen, Arabia)
Hassan bin Yahya (died at Kampong Lintang, Kuching when Yahya was just 2 years old)
Yahya bin Hassan
A'dit bin Hassan (died at the age of 6 years at Kampong Lintang, Kuching)
Habsah (f)
Endoh (f)
Hassan (m)
Aminah (f)
Sabtuyah (f)
Sulieman (m)
Mariam (f)
Hasni (f)

2. *Genealogy of Rahmah** *(wife of Yahya)*



extent. But the few so taken with its prizes and excitements without exception now regret that it was so.

(ii) Pursuit of income took one constantly away, mainly to sea (sailor; and including *ranto* fishermen often working far off in Indonesian waters or off Natuna Islands); could not tend land or think about it enough.

(iii) Parents too poor, family too large, or parents died early leaving large family of small children and all efforts to be concentrated on day-to-day survival (affecting also uncles, etc.).

(iv) For one reason or another, migrated, married and settled down here, with no elaborate family ties or rights. This *need* not be a barrier especially if a man 'retires' here already with means like 'Major' Palton at Bako (L.4).

In the latter rather clearer-cut group are four Santubongites: two originating from Sambas in Kalimantan, one from Oya in the Rejang (Melanau stock) and one Chinese convert, each of whom settled by marriage when adult. Such people may be landless and in that way rate as 'poor', but it may well be that had they not married into a relatively prosperous community they would be even poorer back where they came from.

Two of the fifteen will have no nonsense about it, but flatly insist:

1. 'I have no interest in the land' – he is the ace at *goret* baitless fishing for shark and ray (he has only adopted children, girls).

2. 'I only care for fishing' – he is a big-shot at *ranto* and *pukat* netting especially (his eldest daughter now married, is in Kuching; his eldest son, still at school, also helps his father, including crabbing, *pento*).

31 *A delta Malay tapping rubber*

This tree, nearly fifty years old, has practically been assassinated by excessive rough

Sungei Batu, pioneering local experiment of Malay initiative, as described